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SUBJECT: "A COMMON WORD" -- NEW DEVELOPMENT IN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. A large and diverse group of Muslim scholars has issued a document addressed to the Pope and other prominent Christian leaders, inviting them to a theological dialogue. The document, entitled "A Common Word Between Us and You", is the fruit of long labor guided by a Jordanian institute, and has already prompted numerous welcoming responses from some of the recipients and from other commentators. Its fundamental argument is that Muslims and Christians are both enjoined by their respective holy texts to observe two principles above all -- love of God, and love of one's fellow man. The groundbreaking document is a very positive step toward taking the global stage (in terms of religious debate) away from extremists; it invites the world's Christian communities to contemplate a similarly thoughtful and broad-based response. Embassy recommends consideration of a public USG response, and greater USG participation in events bringing together leading Muslim and Christian scholars and clerics. End summary.

Islamic Scholars Reach out to Christians

¶2. (U) On October 12, 2006, thirty-eight prominent Muslims wrote an "Open Letter to the Pope", addressed to Pope Benedict XVI and politely seeking to engage him on positions he took in his controversial Regensburg lecture of the month before (which was devoted to the topic of faith and reason, but included opening reference to critical comments made about the Prophet Mohammed by the 14th-century Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologos). The letter supported the freedom to profess one's faith without restrictions, asserted the rational consistency of Islam, and restated the limits upon recourse to war and violence in Islamic teaching. It also expressed hope for a relationship between Islam and Christianity founded upon love of God and neighbor, the "two great commandments" of Jesus according to the gospel of Mark. The Holy See did not respond to that letter.

¶3. (U) One year later, on October 11, 2007, a group of 138 highly-respected Muslim scholars have followed up on the original letter by sending a second letter, entitled "A Common Word Between Us and You", this time to a larger audience. In addition to Pope Benedict XVI, the addressees include leaders of the Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, and Baptist Churches, as well as the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches and "leaders of the Christian Churches" in general. The 138 signatories represent 43 countries in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and North America, as well as the Organization of the Islamic Council (OIC); many are personally known to Holy See officials in Rome.

¶4. (U) The document stems from an initiative by the King of Jordan and the Aal al-Bayt (Family of the Prophet) Foundation in

Amman, led by the King's uncle Prince Hassan (a Muslim married to a Hindu). Aal al-Bayt had reportedly been working on the idea for three years. The letter was issued in English, Arabic, French, Italian, and German. The text, along with lists of signers and addressees and responses received, is available at www.acommonword.org.

Presentation in Washington, London, and Dubai

¶5. (U) "A Common Word" -- the title is taken from the third sura of the Quran, verse 64 -- was presented publicly at press conferences in Dubai, London, and Washington, D.C. John Esposito, director of a center for Muslim-Christian understanding at Georgetown University, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Iranian scholar at George Washington University, spoke at the October 11 press conference (at the National Press Club) in Washington, DC, presenting the letter.

¶6. (U) Esposito described the letter's releases as a historic event -- the first time ever that Muslims have come together in such numbers to agree on what binds them theologically to Christians -- and noted the diversity of the participants, who represent a broad spectrum of Muslim thought. He noted that the letter poses a challenge to Christianity: can Christians come together to reply, as Muslims did to write the letter? The document is also an effort to re-take the stage; in other words, extremists of various sorts have confused both Christians and Muslims as to the real identity of the other, and the mainstream in each case needs to regain control of its image.

¶7. (U) Nasr pointed out that although Christian-Muslim theological debate took place in Europe during the Middle Ages, there has been a remarkable lack of such interaction in the centuries that followed. He touched on the difficulty of organizing scholars representing Sunni and Shia perspectives from many different schools, and the still greater difficulty of getting them to agree on a single approach to Christians. Christians, particularly Catholics, have been carrying on interfaith meetings with Islam since 1957, but these have been

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small-scale efforts and have been frequently derailed by obstacles (such as the conflict between the Christian concept of the Trinity vs. Islam's concept of the unity of God). "A Common Word" instead seeks to identify only two fundamental principles -- love of God and love of one's neighbor -- upon which to build agreement between Christians and Muslims. All Christians, and all Muslims, must observe these two principles.

Encouraging Response from Recipients

¶8. (U) Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, who in September of this year assumed leadership of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue (and is thus the Pope's principal aide on these matters), promptly welcomed the second letter on October 12, praising it on Vatican Radio as a "very interesting and novel document" coming from both Sunni and Shiite Muslims, and including numerous citations from the Old and New Testaments. Tauran called it "a very encouraging sign". The Archbishop of Canterbury and former British PM Tony Blair are among other prominent people who have welcomed "A Common Word".

A Catholic Analysis

¶9. (U) Father Samir Khalil Samir, an Egyptian Jesuit teaching in Beirut who is well-regarded in the Vatican, is a frequent and often critical commentator on Islam. His long response to "A Common Word" (also available at the website) analyzes it as a good first step, though one which should go further. He observes favorably the increased number of signatories and the fact that they represent Muslims from 43 nations and include great muftis, religious leaders, and scholars. He also notes the inclusiveness of the signatories, which number Sufis,

Ismailites, and Jafaarites among others.

¶10. (U) Samir points out that in Islamic tradition, faith is founded on three sources: the Quran, the hadith (sayings and tales from the Prophet's life), and the ijmaa (community consensus). "A Common Word" is a positive step toward shaping ijmaa, and one with virtually no precedent. The continuity between the first and second letters is also a positive feature, and the vocabulary in "A Common Word" is Christian rather than Muslim. For example, the term "love" seldom appears in the Quran and is not one of the names of God, but is widely used in Christianity. In other words, the document's signers have chosen to use terminology acceptable to Christians rather than insisting on their own. The document, in quoting from the Old and New Testaments, takes for granted that the Bible is the word of God -- a novelty in Muslim practice. It also quotes St. Paul, usually rejected by most Muslims (on grounds that he distorted Christ's message, for example by introducing the concept of the Trinity). Samir notes that the letter quotes a Quranic verse on tolerance which comes near the end of the Quran and thus cannot be abrogated or overruled by a later verse (according to traditional Quranic interpretation) -- a nice choice to conclude the letter.

¶11. (U) Samir suggests that a logical next step in the process might be trying to broaden the area of agreement between Christians and Muslims to include some of the elements of sacred Scripture, and to be more truly universal (not limited to Christians and Muslims). He cautions that one problematic point is the document's reference to Muslims being not against but with Christians -- "on condition that Christians do not declare war" -- perhaps a reference to Iraq. On a hopeful note, Samir points out that Pope Benedict XVI, in an October 5 speech to the International Theological Commission, spoke of a natural moral law justifying "the foundations of a universal ethic" which in turn forms the basis for entering into dialogue with all people of goodwill; he argues that the Pope, like the signatories of "A Common Word", is trying to find a common basis for dialogue which is not Scriptural but rather based on natural law. (Note: Cardinal Tauran has said much the same to Embassy.)

Comment

¶12. (SBU) The appearance of the "Open Letter" a year ago provoked considerable attention in Rome, and the absence of any formal reply from the Holy See struck many observers as a missed opportunity and perhaps a bit of a snub. The issuance of "A Common Word" raises the stakes. As remarked by Aref Ali Nayed, a UK-based Libyan theologian and signatory of both letters, "A Common Word" marks the most dramatic instance to date of a Muslim consensus proposal to the Christian world. Both letters, in their tone of reasonable discourse meant in a spirit of reconciliation, attempt to undermine the notions that Muslims are not interested in dialogue or cannot respond collectively to the dangerous religious extremism of today's world.

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¶13. (SBU) As noted above, "A Common Word" takes the issue further both substantively (in proposing specific areas of Scripture-based agreement) and tactically (in mustering a wider range of signatories and addressees). The Holy See and the Catholic world, as the largest and most centralized audience for the letter, will be on the spot to help craft a formal response in the coming months. Pope Benedict, perceptibly less warm to interreligious dialogue than his predecessor, has nevertheless given indications of openness on the subject. Cardinal Tauran's welcome of "A Common Word" is encouraging, as are the embraces of other religious and political leaders.

¶14. (SBU) The invitation to dialogue represented by "A Common Word" is religious on one level, but political on another. Embassy Vatican recommends that Department consider a USG public welcome to the initiative (if one has not already been issued). In addition, public diplomacy efforts should be considered to

increase USG diplomatic engagement with the participants in this dialogue, i.e. leading Christian and Muslim scholars. One such opportunity would be greater USG participation in the annual International Prayer for Peace, co-sponsored by the Community of Sant'Egidio; the Prayer was held in Washington, DC in spring 2006, and is currently taking place in Naples, Italy. While Embassy Vatican makes a point of participating (and Under Secretary Hughes addressed the Washington event), broader

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Department and USG participation in future events would be useful both as a symbol and also for networking purposes.

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